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## SELECTING TEXT-BOOKS

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An intelligent choice of text-books depends largely upon the degree to which the person who makes the choice understands the nature of the books and their function in the particular school where they are to be used. In most European countries the text-book, if used at all, is merely a more or less unimportant aid to the teacher, and serves primarily as a compendium or compilation of the materials with which the teacher and the pupils must work. In the United States the text-book has hitherto played a very different and far more important rôle. Often it has been used practically as a substitute for the teacher, and even now this is virtually its function in a large number of our elementary schools. In other cases it plays a rôle intermediate between these extremes. An important tendency can be described in the statement that in some of our best city schools the text-book is gradually but surely being crowded into the background, while the teacher is being accorded a more prominent place.

In writing or compiling text-books a tendency has manifested itself in recent years to ignore the fact that a large number of our teachers are quite dependent upon the text-book. There is a disposition, which may be quite justifiable from the pedagogic viewpoint, to make the text-book a mere compilation of material, encroaching as little as possible upon the domain of the teacher.

To give more point to my remarks let me speak of my own experience with a certain text in arithmetic. This text is of recent date, written by a well-known and thoroughly competent

author and published by a reliable firm. It possesses many points of excellence. All the obsolete and unpractical material of older texts has been discarded, and excellent new material taken from the home, the farm, the store, the industries, etc., has been substituted. On the other hand, the book has very serious defects. It is intended for both seventh and eighth grade work; yet such fundamental topics as common fractions, decimals, and denominate numbers find no systematic and comprehensive treatment therein. They are touched upon only by way of problems for review; and what is given in these lines is scattered throughout the whole book, so that it does not lend itself to a systematic and somewhat thoroughgoing review, such as is often necessary where these matters have been covered in the sixth grade. The treatment of these topics in the lower grades is usually not such that the pupils can be expected to proceed in their course without at least a thoroughgoing review and without filling in some of the gaps that were left in their previous work. To be sure the author of this text has treated these topics more adequately in a book intended for grades five and six. In selecting a text-book for the seventh and eighth grades, however, we must bear in mind that in a school where free text-books are furnished, the pupils of grades seven and eight will not have access to the texts they used in their previous work, and hence may be seriously handicapped. Even the best of teachers desiring to give her seventh-grade pupils a thoroughgoing review of denominate numbers, for instance, would experience a great deal of difficulty in finding and bringing together enough material for this purpose if the pupils had only the one text, for this book omits even most of the tables of measure and weight.

If an experienced and well-equipped teacher would find it difficult to use such a text, what could be expected of an inexperienced and not so well-equipped teacher who is struggling with this subject and perhaps several others? Failure and

disappointment for both teacher and class is the only thing that can reasonably be expected in such a case. Yet the choosing of this text might be expected to have just such disastrous consequences in more than half of our schools. To select this or a similar text for a rural school would be folly, for here the teacher hears from twenty-five to thirty-five recitations a day. It is utterly impossible for her to map out any one course. All that can reasonably be expected of her, as those who have taught in such schools know, is that she follow more or less closely the course as mapped out in some good text-book suitable for this purpose, that she explain obscure points, adapt certain parts to local needs, stimulate and inspire the pupils to work and test their progress in assimilating this material.

Again, in a school system where the percentage of inexperienced and inadequately equipped teachers is as high as it is in this country, the text-book ought to be of such a nature as to enable the brighter pupils to master a given subject, in a fashion at least, even without much aid from a teacher.

Of course, there is this objection to a "self-teaching" text-book. It may hamper a good teacher and may not permit her to bring into action her own powers and resources, though this is not necessarily the case. Surely it does not seem wise to handicap our best teachers because of the incompetence of others. We should not discourage the production of text-books which give the teacher large freedom of action. Probably all educators agree that the rôle of the teacher in our schools must constantly, though gradually, be made more important, while that of the text-book may safely be made less prominent. To accomplish this will require many years of persistent effort on the part of our leaders in education. In the meantime we can not at once discard the more or less self-teaching text-book—crutch though it be—in schools where there are no teachers to supply something better. This diffi-

culty can perhaps best be solved by exercising the proper care in the selection of text-books.

In rural and village schools, where proper grading of pupils is impossible and where, because of small salaries, inexperienced and often untrained teachers must be employed, no texts should be chosen which make great demands upon the teacher. In city schools, on the other hand, where teachers are usually well-equipped and where there are fewer changes in the personnel of the teaching staff, texts may well be selected that make far greater demands upon the teacher and really will give her opportunities to use her own talent and powers unhampered.

Consider for a moment the choice of a beginners' text in any one of the modern languages now taught in the high schools. The most recent text-books in the field of modern languages demand the so-called direct method of instruction. They furnish only a minimum of formal grammar and dispense with translation either completely or nearly so, while they stress oral work in the foreign tongue throughout the course. A book of this kind may be an excellent text for an experienced teacher who has a thorough command of her subject and a good speaking knowledge of the language. With her, the danger that the work will degenerate into a mere process of memorizing phrases and sentences is not so great, though even here it is ever present. If, however, the modern language teacher of the average town high school should undertake to use such a book, we could expect only complete failure.

*Festina lente* might, therefore, well serve us as a motto in our effort to reform the text-book, and even more so in our endeavor to introduce the more extreme types of the newer texts into schools where teachers are not ready to assume the rôle that was hitherto filled by the text-book. Care in the selection of text-books should be especially great wherever they are furnished by the school, for here it is only rarely possible to have a change in text with every new teacher.

Persons choosing text-books should, therefore, know as definitely as possible not only the character of the books they are selecting but also the character, intellectual equipment, and professional training of the teachers who are to use them. Furthermore, they should know and take into careful consideration the conditions under which the teachers must use these books, whether in large or small classes and whether the teachers are limited to one or two subjects which they have thoroughly mastered, or are obliged to teach a large number of subjects none of which they have mastered sufficiently to be able to be independent of the text-book.